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Nigar Baimova

Introduction

The Government of Azerbaijan has committed itself in a variety of ways to the goals and particulars of the Education for All (EFA) movement. The Ministry of Education completed a Year EFA 2001 assessment report and number of efforts have been taken to identify the main problems that prevent the system from serving all children. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the system of education in Azerbaijan with particular attention given to the issue of increased dropouts, its meaning and the causes of this problem. Specific issues examined include the issues of equity, quality, effectiveness and rationality within the current education system. The main purpose is to investigate these problems and suggest ways that the education services might overcome them. This paper identified some significant deficiencies in the current system. They include the following:

- Increased inequality and serious inefficiencies in the system;
- Privatisation of educational costs and services;
- Significant disparities by region in the amounts spent per pupil by schools.
- Little official data available and denial of the existing problems in the education system.

The findings are summarised in a set of recommendations which can be found at the end of this paper. It is important to note that implementing some of these recommendations requires major and perhaps controversial changes in the structure of education, for example, the educational budget could be utilised more efficiently by reducing the number of teachers. As management is increasingly decentralised, funding remains still centralised, making it all the more necessary for a transparent formula to be established for deciding on the allocation of funds. A new funding scheme that relies on money transfers from central to local authorities should be developed.

One of the main arguments of this paper is that the Ministry of Education should take a stronger oversight role in ensuring that enrollment levels and quality are maintained at a minimum standard in all regions, for example, developing interventions that would reduce the impact of factors other than right and merit (family income, family education, locality etc) on educational access and achievement. This might include scholarships for pupils from disadvantaged groups, differential current and capital expenditure per pupil in disadvantaged schools and drive against illegal payments of all kinds.

Need for this study

As in most post-Soviet societies, the education legacy from the pre-independence period in Azerbaijan continues to exert a major impact on structures and practices. There is a preference for the format of the lecture rather than instruction, and an emphasis on memorisation and the recitation of factual information. This typically pervades all grade levels and subject areas in primary and secondary schools. However, the issue of drop-outs is "new" in Azerbaijan and awareness of it among actors throughout the system appears to be relatively low. Nonetheless, a variety of pieces of evidence (interviews, data collection etc) suggest that a substantial, but unknown, number of children in Azerbaijan are either absent from schools or drop-out altogether (Williams, 2000), which negatively affects prospects for continued national development. According to various sources, the understanding of the increased number of drop-outs as a problem varies considerably: A number of educators saw the problem as "real, but not big". Other suggested that this was not really a problem in Azerbaijan. There also was a group how saw a problem as a serious issue, particularly for the future.

Given Azerbaijan's strong tradition of universal education (literacy rates at the 1989 census were 97.3 percent of the 15 + year old population and 99.9 percent – the population aged 15-24) this is an issue which deserves attention, if, for no other reason than to prevent current problems from getting even worse. Because the problem is a relatively recent one, there is a lack of awareness, which results in a lack of knowledge about the extent of the problem and its causes. As a consequence, the system is ill prepared to cope and prevent the problem.

The Scope of Problem

According to a 1996 quantitative study, the primary reason (27.1% of responses) reported for non-attendance was that children did not want to attend. Outdated teaching methods and the lack of a relevant curriculum maybe some of the underlying causes for the general poor attitude of children. Early marriage, especially in rural areas, was mentioned among the main reasons for non-attendance of females. Irregular attendance is a huge area of concern. It may be caused by a number of problems that have different underlying causes including illness, poor physical condition of the school, reluctance to attend because of the quality of education, desire to help the family by generating income, or the inability of parents to provide appropriate clothing or "hidden" school fees. The issue of drop-outs mainly affects the most vulnerable groups of children - street children; internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees and also children from poor families. One report suggested that in 1995, at least, 30 percent of IDP/refugee children did not attend school (Azerbaijan League of the Rights of the Child, 1996). This contrasts with interviews conducted with school officials in IDP camps. The results of interviews suggest that school leaders know all the children in the camp, enroll and keep track of them. It was estimated 3 out of 100 children might repeat or miss school for an extended period due to illness. Assuming the high figure is correct, approximately 3.2 percent of the school age population in 1999 would be IDP/refugee children not attending school. The issue of equal access to education is challenged in this respect. Decreased public spending on education and increased private education expenditure affect enrolments in education and have implications for the quality of education. Ensuring educational quality should be a national priority and the prerequisite for the national security of the country. There is a need for strong oversight from the Ministry of Education to monitor trends and to put in place national policies to deal with observed variations in educational coverage, quality and learning outcomes.

Methodology and Sources of Data

Three sources of data were used in this study. The first was comprised of artefacts, including government and NGO publications, reports from other agencies and investigators, and legal documents. The second major source of data was interviews with government officials, school administrators, primary and secondary school teachers, individuals associated with international agencies, and individuals associated with national and international NGOs. Interview questions varied according to the role of the respondent and also according to initial responses provided. Some respondents were interviewed on two or more occasions, as needed to clarify responses or because of questions arising from subsequent interviews of other respondents. The third source of data consisted of observations in some of the schools in Baku or outside.

The Context of Education in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan had strong social indicators before independence. Basic food and consumer needs were met and access to health and education was universal. According to the World Bank Project Appraisal Document (1999) on a Proposed Learning and Innovation Credit (Report No. 18991-AZ), Azerbaijan inherited "a developed education from the Former Soviet Union (FSU), and its impressive educational statistics at all levels of education place it in the ranks of middle income countries, and ahead of several FSU countries". They note, however, that education in Azerbaijan is also confronting several major

challengers. Since independence in 1991 the level of social indicators has deteriorated, partly because of the large number of displaced people. A recent study undertaken in Azerbaijan by the World Bank classified over 60 percent of the households as poor and 20 percent as very poor. Among displaced persons, the incidence of poverty was 75 percent.

Currently, funding of education in Azerbaijan is mainly centralised. There is little transparency and accountability in the system. The education budget has declined affecting expenditures on primary and secondary education. In response to declining resources, the education sector has adjusted spending in several ways (sharp declines in capital expenditure, difficulties in the production and distribution of textbooks and other learning materials etc). The real value of teachers' wages fell, thus creating an environment of corruption.

There are emerging regional differentials in enrollments and extended absence in schools. Two of the main principal reasons are poverty in the home and an unsupportive school environment. The first of these reasons is manifested in children not having adequate clothing or appropriate materials and in a need to assist the family to earn money. The second reason is that schools are in terrible state, there is an absence of teaching and learning materials and sometimes teachers display a hostile attitude to children from poor households. Although all these factors are directly linked to the economic situation in the country, the problem of non-attendance can be addressed by policy changes in order to reduce the effects of poverty and promote a more supportive and attractive school environment.

Enrolment in education

	1989	1999	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Pre-primary enrolments (net rates, % of population aged 3-6)	21.6	20.7	19.9	18.8	18.7	16.2	15.2	13.9	13.2	13.2	13.9
Basic education enrolments (gross rates, % of population aged 7-15)	87.8	87.7	87.8	88.2	89.1	90.3	91.2	90.6	91.5	87.2	86.8
Upper secondary enrolments (gross rates, % o, aged 15-18)	62.8	59.5	58.7	52.0	43.5	38.5	35.3	36.9	40.6	41.6	42.7

Source: Ministry of Education

Although, state enrolment figures indicate that 91% of children were enrolled in 1995, other evidence suggests that a substantial number of children in Azerbaijan either have not been enrolled or have not attended school, or were absent from school for long periods of time. There seem to be various forces that act on schools and on individual teachers to promote the under-reporting of non-attendance and drop-outs. There may well be an administrative pressure to produce attendance figures that indicate conformity with public policy as well as a sensitivity on the part of teachers and schools to the economic circumstances of individual students and their families. The World Bank's Poverty Assessment report provides the following figures: While in their account enrolment at ages 6 to 16 was 81 per cent, extended absence was 10% thus reducing the effective enrolment to around 80%.

In most of the cases children not attending schools are working trying to support their families. A nationally representative survey of 6166 households by UNICEF in 2000 showed that 13 per of children aged 5-14 were working. The most remarkable was the class difference: "only 5% of children in rich households are currently working, while the corresponding figure for children in poor households is 22%". In other words, students from middle and upper income families are more likely to participate in education and receive better schooling, and access to higher education.

Implications for educational quality

In the Constitution of Azerbaijan the right to education is determined as follows: "Everybody has the right to get education and the right to choose the form of education". The state must ensure the adequacy of education in line with international regulations and standards. In terms of the Law on Education, the State recognises the priority of education and on the basis of it implements state policy in the field of education. However, in reality the education system of Azerbaijan is confronted with number of problems. In real terms, the declines in expenditures on education have been considerable. Thus, while relative spending and basic enrolments rates have remained more or less stable, real expenditures per pupil in basic education have dropped sharply. This decline in resources has been adjusted on quality within the system rather than in terms of less "quantity" or narrower access to basic education.

Teachers and textbooks

Access to school relates to children possessing the opportunity to learn, but educational quality contributes to actual learning achievement. Measurable inputs that comprise educational quality include teaching staff, educational materials and school conditions. Although data on the links between educational quality and students outcomes are scarce, the quality of teachers, learning materials and schools conditions are strongly associated with success in learning outcomes.

Teachers are central to the reform process and they represent key players in ensuring education quality as well as in the implementation of reforms, such as the introduction of new curricula and teaching methods. However, their conditions are not good in Azerbaijan. The low prestige of the teaching profession has directly influenced the quality of education provision in two ways. The low salaries and prestige of the teaching profession result that the best teachers leave the school at the first opportunity, and that the qualified young people are not attracted to the profession. Those who remain in schools look for second jobs and/or other means to support their income. Often teachers impose fees on students for tutoring, special classes and extracurricular activities. While allowing teachers the opportunity to add up to the low wages, this creates the environment for greater inequity with the school as most families are unable to pay for such services.

For textbooks, only 70 percent of primary school children are provided with free textbooks by the Government, with children from grades 5-11 paying. The textbook issue has been complicated by the sharp rise in paper price. The ability to plan and budget the large-scale textbook production has been affected by the breakdown of trade networks and as a result, access to materials has declines and the quality of the present stock of textbooks has worsened. In 1998, only 3.2 percent of education spending was on textbooks and curriculum development. Free textbooks are provided in more limited numbers than official figures suggest.

There is a considerable variation among schools by regions and by types and rate of absence and drop-outs have increased. For example, the percent of relevant age group (3-6 years) attending kindergartens has dropped from 19 in 1990 to 11 percent in 1999. In upper secondary education, the share of the relevant age group (15-18 years) attending school dropped from 34 percent in 1990 to 22 percent in 1998. Children and adolescents out of school are also vulnerable to the attractions of street life and organised gangs of children, which contributes to problems of delinquency and crime.

Monitoring learning achievement

The question of quality in learning is important, however this is an area that is difficult to measure. My assessment of learning achievement has been limited to ad hoc monitoring and school-based. University admission results were also used in assessing learning achievement. From the data available from State

Students Admission Committee it is clear that majority (64%) of those who apply for places at the higher education do not gain admission.

There is a widening gap in achievement among students by place of residence. There is a large differentiation between rural areas and urban areas. Evidence suggest that access here varies with income level. It is felt that widespread use of extra-curricular private tutoring financed by parents is considered by to be an important source of social inequity.

Implications for equity in education

Patterns of educational access have changed in Azerbaijan. It is unlikely that the substantial shifts in enrolment at various levels of education to have been random in their incidence among children from different sorts of families. Family background and place of residence become even more important in determination of access to education. Thus, it is undeniable that the importance of family income in determining enrolment and attendance increased during 1990s. Various factors such as information tuition charges, various "entrance fees", payment for textbooks and other school materials make it difficult for children from poorer families to stay in the school system. The problem begins at pre-school level, where the proportion of children from low-income households enrolled is typically much lower than in the case of middle or high income households. Attendance rates also tend to vary with household income. The Human Development Report 1999 for Azerbaijan indicates that among very poor 6 to 16 year olds rates for extended absence ranges from 43 percent in the far south and 38 percent in Nakhchivan to only 2 percent in the Absheron peninsula. The average household over the last half of the 1990's, in which nearly three-quarters of households have been using 70% of their expenditure on food, and in which, in 1997 an average wage could purchase only two-fifths of a minimum consumer basket (UNICEF, 1999:1).

Household monthly education expenditure by expenditure group (manats)

	National	Very Poor	Poor	Non-poor
Educational items	11,868	7,243	9,198	16,131
Fees	1,830	703	1,334	2,615
Total	13,698	7,946	10,532	18,746
% of total non-food expenditures	5.4%	5.7%	5.4%	5.4%
Per child average	8,561	3,784	5,543	17,042

Source: World Bank Social Assessment Report

From the table above we can conclude that the non-poor spend four and a half times as much per child as the very poor, so that private expenditures show large variations, which means that looking at only public spending and coverage does not give a full picture of how the poor appear to be suffering a differential impact of the public financing squeeze.

Inefficient allocation of funds/Disparities

The system of funding of education in Azerbaijan is very typical to many of those in CIS countries. Unlike other countries where the funding is allocated based on demand and based on a per pupil allocation, in Azerbaijan it is based on the cost of funding the curriculum. That is costs are driven by the number of teachers that are needed to deliver the curriculum. As a result in Azerbaijan there are many small schools, which benefit, whereas large schools with large number of students are in disadvantaged situation. It was impossible to obtain data from the Ministry of Education about allocation of resources among various schools and municipalities, however unofficial findings of NGOs ("Hayat", "Reliable Future") reveals that there is considerable variation in pupils per teacher. While according to the MOE

figures for 2000 the student teacher ratio in general education is 12:1, the range is from a low of 8 in Shemakha to 18 in Baku. Average class size is 18 in Baku, with a low of 6 in Shemakha and a high of 35 in Baku. With current system in place the class costs about the same, regardless of the number of students in the class. Disparities in class size and student-teacher ratio are reflected and lead to disparities in per pupil allocations. All these unavoidably lead to inequalities in education since as mentioned above if a rural school in Shemakha with very few students receives the same amount as large school in Baku, there are no incentives for schools to become more efficient. The State could develop more efficient and equitable system if the funding of school could be developed on a per capita (per pupil) basis.

Public spending on education

The public education system is primarily financed from general revenues. The education budget is divided into two major components: Republican budget and local city or district-level budgets. The most serious problem in education is considerable decline in the level of public funding largely due to reduced levels of economic activity and government revenues. Since education is largely dependent on state funding, a drop in the level of public spending for education has resulted in considerable decline in the quality of education in the country. In Azerbaijan, public investment in education as a percent of GDP has dropped dramatically from close to 7% in 1992 to 3.8% in 2001. In the State budget of the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2001, approved by the Parliament of the Country, expenditures for the education have been foreseen in the sum of 1,1,011 133,0 million manats, which contains 22,0% of the general expenditure of the Country Budget (Table 1).

Table 1

Public education expenditure	1992	1993	1994	1996	2001
As share of GDP	6.7%	7.1%	4.9%	3.2%	3.8%
As share of total					
Government expenditure	13.4%	12.8%	10.2%	19.2%	22.0%
In real terms (using GDP deflator)	100	83	45	24	22

Source: Ministry of Education

In light of decreasing expenditure levels, the distribution of spending has become an even more important issue. Inconsistent reforms in the mechanism of funding education have resulted in further inequalities in education finance. According to 1992 Education Law central government devolved responsibilities to local "raion" authorities, which appears to have increased variations in school quality and widening regional differentiation in per pupil expenditure. There is little transparency or predictability in either the amount of funding schools receive or priorities that determine eligibility for funding. Schools have virtually no control over funding. Even repair works are negotiated with the Ministry of Education and raion authorities.

Teachers salaries fell in real and relative terms, the number of teachers is high and the share of staff costs in total remains high. Badly paid and demoralised teachers often find other sources of income. Majority survive by giving private lessons, petty trading, farming, teaching in more than one school, or taking other second job. A smaller, full-time, better paid teaching force would have higher morale and would be more effective.

Private education expenditures

There is a declining ability of household and individuals to cover educational costs. Unemployment is increasing. If in 1991 there were 11321 persons looking for a job, in 1998 this figure was 77904. Number of unemployed per registered vacancy was 8.2 in 1998 compared to 0.6 in 1991 (Source: State Statistics Committee). Falling wage levels and increased poverty has led to growing division between non-poor and

poor. Parents are often unable to buy basic essentials such as pencils and paper, or to pay for costs of transportation. Especially in the winters most of them find it difficult to provide their children with adequate clothing and shoes necessary for unheated classrooms.

Reforming the education system

The low level of public allocations to education means that budgetary funds will have to be used more efficiently. An important potential source of increased efficiency is reduction in the number of teachers, with consequent improvements in the salaries and morale of those that remain, and scope for needed improvements in the salaries and expenditure. Since independence, the number of teachers per student has actually increased slightly, despite large real resource cuts. The scope of the problem can be seen in official figures for 1998, with almost 200,000 workers in education accounting for around 14 percent of the work force (and 44 percent of total government employment), making education the second largest sector of employment after agriculture. The problem is that allocation of teachers and wages is done according to notional class sizes rather than actual student numbers, encouraging the continued operation of marginal schools. The economy is unlikely to be able to afford a public sector that employs so many people.

A further important policy area is that of community financing, for which the Government should seek to develop replicable models. These should ensure that adequate overall resources for education are mobilised, but must also take into account the relative ability of different households to contribute to cost of recovery.

There should be more decentralisation as means to raise learning achievement. The mechanism for this are increased efficiency and greater local accountability in the supply of education, leading to higher quality schools that are more in line with the population's preferences.

Summary of Recommendations

The following steps are recommended as a starting point for dealing with the problems:

- **Gather Information.** First of all, the dimensions of the problem should be documented, new enrolment rates need to be examined carefully and a household survey to estimate the extent of drop-outs should be conducted.
- **Create Awareness -** Information campaign among policy makers, educators and service providers at all levels of the system to bring the problem of drop-outs to their attention and urge them to think over the steps they can take to overcome the problems; Media campaign to create awareness.
- **Develop a plan of action to deal with problems.** Organise a special department/agency to deal with the problem, including representatives from all levels of the education and youth/sports NGOs, communities etc.
- **Train actors at the different levels of the system and develop targeted programs,** where children who have dropped out of school for several years can complete their schooling. Develop school programs to accommodate the needs of working children, to develop homes to meet demand of street children.
- **Education Spending -** The Government should assess the incidence of public education spending to examine the extent to which it is biased against the poor and introduce methods to redress imbalances.
- **Improve the quality of education -** The Government should assess the sustainability of current teacher/student ratios and the need to increase average levels of teacher pay in the public system.

At a minimum, teach/student ratios should not be allowed to increase in coming years, and the objective should be to reduce them.

- Increase standards in Education - The Ministry of Education should take a stronger oversight role in ensuring that enrollment levels and quality are maintained at a minimum standard in all regions.
- The provision of adequate classrooms and teachers in accessible schools is an important condition for universal education, but other, complementary measures are necessary to ensure that all children actually attend school. Parents need to be encouraged and convinced to send their children to school and compulsory education laws need to be enforced. The same should be done with child labour laws.
- Incentives to increase children participation in education -distribution of school meals to the refugee children or very poor children can be a strong incentive for them to enrol and attend regularly. School feeding programmes could become an effective way to involve parents in school affairs and improve school-community relations. When parents are motivated and involved in school life, the education of their children benefits. This practice is in practice in most countries and could be sponsored either by food aid organisations or by using local resources.

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